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Controversial Houston nightclub's owner defends packed weekend crowds - CultureMap Houston

CECI NEST PAS UNE NIGHTCLUB

Controversial Houston nightclub's owner defends packed weekend crowds

By [Eric Sandler](#)

Jun 29, 2020, 2:16 pm

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Spire was almost as packed last weekend as it was during the 2017 Super Bowl. *Photo by Christopher Polk/Getty Images*

Sometimes a nightclub isn't a nightclub. That's the message from a person affiliated with Spire after the downtown hotspot came under [heavy criticism for video](#) that showed customers dancing in the venue despite Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's order that [shuttered bars statewide](#).

"Back in November 2019, the main owner had come to the realization that he no longer owned a bar," Bret Hightower tells CultureMap [content partner ABC13](#). "He owned a lounge/venue hall because most of the revenue was not coming from alcohol or liquor sales. It was coming from ticket sales, and then to be able to reserve your own private section."

Since the venue is a "reception hall," it is not subject to the restrictions on bars, Hightower argues. In his view, the problem isn't that Spire had too many people; it's that customers simply ignored the rules the venue tried to enforce.

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"That's why we have an emphasis on a social lounge with food," Hightower says. "Our emphasis is not to have drunk partygoers. From the videos, we were doing our best to control that."

Clé Group's Zack Truesdell spoke to CultureMap exclusively and says that Hightower is a "liaison" between the club and the City of Houston. He defended Spire's actions, citing a late-night visit by auditors from the The Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

"TABC came to our establishment at 1:30 in the morning," says Truesdell. "We had about 200 people there — our occupancy is about 1,200, so were operating about an 18 percent load. They saw everything — from the entrance, to the signs, to us making people wear a mask on the way to the restroom — and they took many videos. From that, they allowed us to remain open — and continue to open."

As for whether Spire is a nightclub or a reception hall, Truesdell says it's "a little bit of everything."

Whether the staff at Spire was truly "doing its best" might be a matter of some dispute. As videos circulated on social media over the weekend, the business drew sharp criticism from others members of Houston's bar and restaurant community.

Bobby Heugel, who closed his bars Anvil and Better Luck Tomorrow in compliance with the governor's orders, concluded a [lengthy Instagram post](#) with the following statement:

I don't know these guys or frequent their bars, but it's clear they redefined the club experience in Houston. It's even hard to not be impressed in a morbid fucked up way that they can actually pack a bar during a pandemic shutdown! But Clé Group, y'all (and others) are crushing other operators with your greed and lack of consideration for every single out of work bartender, server, busser, etc. Quit fucking the rest of us...y'all are better than this right?

"I think he's a great operator and he's certainly entitled to say whatever he feels on social media," Truesdell says, responding to Heugel's post.

Sean Beck, beverage director for H-Town Restaurant Group (Hugo's, Backstreet Cafe, etc.) expressed a similar sentiment in a [public Facebook post](#) that's been shared over 200 times:

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Restaurants have been working for nearly 2 months to operate responsibly with tons of space, separation, sanitation, cleanliness procedures and staff testing. Restaurants are fighting to stay alive and to be safe for our communities and yet this place is doing this. I don't know who gets to make the call, but this place shouldn't be allowed to operate based on any of the guidelines we have been pressed by state and local officials.

Whether the government will act against Spire or any of the other nightclubs that operated over the weekend remains to be seen. Hightower tells ABC13 that the downtown nightclub passed an inspection over the weekend, and sister property Clé did not suffer any regulatory consequences for the [massive pool party](#) it hosted during Memorial Day weekend.

"Do we have challenges keeping people socially distanced when they're fighting us on it," Truesdell says. "Yes. Have we received even one violation from any of the City's departments? No."

With additional reporting by Steven Devadanam

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TABC Slaps Two Notorious Houston Nightclubs With Liquor License Suspensions - Eater Houston

TABC Slaps Two Notorious Houston Nightclubs With Liquor License Suspensions

Cle will lose its liquor license for 60 days, and Spire won't be able to serve booze for 90 days

by [Amy McCarthy](#) Jan 19, 2021, 3:02pm CST



The pool at Cle [Cle Houston/Facebook](#)

After videos of massive crowds inside Houston nightclubs Spire and Cle went viral over the weekend, the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission has yet again suspended the liquor licenses of the two repeat offenders.

The agency announced the emergency suspensions in a press release on Tuesday afternoon, noting that Cle will lose its license for 60 days, and Spire will lose its ability to legally serve alcohol for 90 days. Even though both spots are obviously nightclubs, Spire and Cle have operated under a loophole in Gov. Greg Abbott's executive order that allows them to open as "reception halls" because the bulk of their revenue allegedly comes from ticket sales and not alcoholic beverages.

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TABC Slaps Two Notorious Houston Nightclubs With Liquor License Suspensions - Eater Houston

As the agency's release notes, both Cle and Spire have already had their liquor licenses suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic — once for Cle, and **twice for Spire**. Cle Group, the hospitality group behind the clubs, can appeal the decision in front of a state administrative judge, but will not be able to sell alcohol unless a judge rules in their favor.

A third Houston bar, Grooves at 2300 Pierce Street, also lost its liquor license for 30 days after an unspecified violation on January 16.

Over the weekend, **Houston mayor Sylvester Turner called on TABC to close the loopholes that allow spots like Cle and Spire to operate, and criticized rapper Bow Wow, who was at Cle on Saturday night to celebrate a friend's birthday. In October, Turner added Spire to the city's "Wall of Shame,"** intended to call out establishments that were worsening the COVID-19 pandemic by not enforcing the rules.

Bow Wow, born Shad Miller, ultimately tweeted an apology to Turner on Tuesday morning.

- **Rapper Bow Wow and Mayor Sylvester Turner Beef on Social Media After Yet Another Crowded Club Concert [EHOU]**
- **Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner Adds Three Bars to City's 'Wall of Shame' [EHOU]**
- **TABC Suspends Notorious Houston Bar Spire's Liquor License [EHOU]**

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Massive Pool Party Packs Houston Club Cle on Reopening Weekend - Eater Houston

Massive Pool Party Packs Houston Club Cle on Reopening Weekend

It doesn't look like a whole lot of social distancing was happening

by [Amy McCarthy](#) May 26, 2020, 9:00am CDT



The pool at Cle in 2019 [Cle Houston/Facebook](#)

On the first weekend that Texas governor Greg Abbott allowed bars and clubs across the state to reopen their doors, a Houston nightclub went viral thanks to its massive crowds.

The viral frenzy began on Sunday, when video of the completely packed club was posted to Twitter. In the video, there's nary a mask in sight, and social distancing guidelines are definitely not being followed, much less Abbott's 25 percent occupancy limit on bars. The short video clip, which was originally posted to Instagram, has been viewed more than 600,000 times.

Check it out for yourself here:

To be sure, even though Cle was the Houston bar that got the most attention for breaking the rules this weekend, it wasn't the only one. Houston Fire Department chief Samuel Pena [said](#) on Sunday

<https://houston.eater.com/2020/5/26/21270168/cle-houston-club-pool-party-crowds-reopening-weekend-texas-coronavirus-covid-19>

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Massive Pool Party Packs Houston Club Cle on Reopening Weekend - Eater Houston

that the HFD fielded about 300 complaints of businesses violating the order over the weekend.

“A photo was sent to me and there are others on social media of crowds in clubs/bars ignoring the 25% occupancy requirement, no social distancing and no masks,” Houston mayor Sylvester Turner tweeted. “I want us to move forward but this will set us back.”

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Notorious Houston Nightclub Cle Slapped With Yet Another Liquor License Suspension - Eater Houston

Notorious Houston Nightclub Cle Slapped With Yet Another Liquor License Suspension

The 7-day suspension follows a shooting at the club that killed two people over the weekend

by [Amy McCarthy](#) Jun 1, 2021, 10:30am CDT



The pool at Cle [Cle Houston/Facebook](#)

Cle, the notorious Houston nightclub that frequently made headlines during 2020 for flouting social distancing guidelines, is back in the news again.

Over the weekend, ABC13 reported that the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission had suspended the club's liquor license following a shooting at Cle that claimed the lives of two people and injured two more. According to the agency, the suspension is in effect for seven days as the TABC investigates the incident. The club will be allowed to resume operations following that seven day period, "pending the results of the investigation," according to the TABC.

Houston Police have not released many details about the incident, only that it occurred at around 1 a.m. on Monday morning and involved a single shooter. One of the injured victims remains in critical

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Notorious Houston Nightclub Cle Slapped With Yet Another Liquor License Suspension - Eater Houston

condition at a local hospital.

This is just the latest temporary liquor license suspension for the Cle Group, which operates Cle and Spire, among other establishments, over the past year. It's the third suspension for the bar in the past 16 months alone, and **comes on the heels of a 60-day suspension that began in January**. Its sister spot, Spire, was also issued a 90-day suspension back in January.

Throughout the pandemic, Cle and Spire were able to sidestep regulations intended to encourage social distancing and limited capacity at restaurants by operating as "reception halls" instead of the nightclubs that they actually are. The clubs **drew ire from officials like Houston mayor Sylvester Turner**, who implored the TABC to crack down on establishments that were breaking COVID-19 regulations as the city attempted to manage the pandemic.

- **TABC Hits Two Houston Nightclubs With Liquor License Suspensions [EHOU]**
- **Rapper Bow Wow and Mayor Sylvester Turner Beef on Social Media After Yet Another Crowded Club Concert [EHOU]**
- **TABC Suspends Notorious Houston Bar Spire's Liquor License [EHOU]**
- **TABC suspends Houston club's alcohol license after deadly shooting [ABC13]**



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Houston Nightclub Spire Attracts Massive Crowds Even After Gov. Abbott Orders Texas Bars to Close - Eater Houston

After Gov. Abbott Ordered Bars to Close, Massive Crowds Still Packed Into Houston Nightclub Spire

Bar owners and hospitality professionals spoke out against Spire's refusal to abide by social distancing guidelines and capacity limits

by [Amy McCarthy](#) Jun 29, 2020, 9:44am CDT



Spire Nightclub in Downtown Houston [Spire/Facebook](#)

After Texas Gov. Greg Abbott ordered bars across the state to close, one Houston nightclub continued to operate this weekend, and it was totally packed.

Screenshots from Downtown Houston nightclub Spire from over the weekend show massive crowds, little social distancing, and very few face masks. It's the second time since the pandemic began that Cle Group, which operates Spire and Downtown pool club Cle, has obviously flouted the rules that required bars to close or minimize capacity.

Back in May, Cle hosted a Memorial Day pool party that went viral on social media, when screenshots of a massive pool party at the bar went viral on Instagram. This was when Abbott reopened bars just before Memorial Day, initially allowing them to operate at 25 percent capacity.

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Houston Nightclub Spire Attracts Massive Crowds Even After Gov. Abbott Orders Texas Bars to Close - Eater Houston

Not surprisingly, at least a few Houston bar owners who have been following the rules were pretty pissed to see the crowds at Spire over the weekend. In a lengthy post to Instagram, Heugel criticized Spire's operators both for endangering public health and ruining things for bars that were actually operating safely.

"It's hard to tell if Spire is defying state mandate or using some sort of loophole that will continue to make sure the rest of us can't open as cases spike, but State and City leadership need to explain what the rest of us are rightfully concerned about being possible corruption," Heugel wrote. "This has to stop if our industry is going to survive. Bartenders and servers everywhere are out of work, many of my bar owner friends are barely hanging on, and we are literally about to run out of hospital beds at the largest medical center in the world."

Sean Beck, sommelier at H-Town Restaurant Group, offered a similar sentiment via Facebook post. "I don't know who gets to make the call, but this place shouldn't be allowed to operate based on any of the guidelines we have been pressed by state and local officials," Beck wrote. "It's exhausting that people and irresponsible operators are doing untold damage to our community and industries. I hope the government officials do what is right."

Speaking with ABC13's Mycah Hatfield, **Spire part-owner Bret Hightower said that his establishment was a "reception hall,"** and not a nightclub, because it makes most of its revenue from the sale of tickets. Hightower also said that clubgoers and staff were required to wear masks, but photos from this weekend don't support that claim.

In a **tweet** on Sunday, Houston mayor Sylvester Turner said that officials from the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission were out inspecting Houston's bars and restaurants for their compliance with the rules laid out in Abbott's most recent executive order. Clearly, Spire wasn't one of them.

Meanwhile, as the Houston Chronicle reported, **the state of Texas reported yet another record high number of new COVID-19 cases** on Saturday. The day before, **Harris County judge Lina Hidalgo urged Houstonians to stay home** as COVID-19 cases surge in Houston and its surrounding areas.



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Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner Adds Three Bars to City's Coronavirus 'Wall of Shame' - Eater Houston

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner Adds Three Bars to City's 'Wall of Shame'

The mayor scolded the establishments that operated over capacity in defiance of Gov. Greg Abbott's order limiting capacity

by Amy McCarthy Jun 29, 2020, 3:35pm CDT



Mayor Sylvester Turner, pictured left Photo by Sergio Flores/Getty Images

On Monday, Houston mayor Sylvester Turner announced the first three additions to the city's "Wall of Shame," a collection of businesses that aren't following the guidelines implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Turner announced that three Houston bars are the first establishments on his "Wall of Shame," including Downtown nightclub Spire, **which inspired criticism after photos of a packed house from over the weekend surfaced on social media**. Bustling bar Prospect Park was also added to the list, along with Pour Behavior at 2211 Travis Street.

It's unclear exactly what being on this "Wall of Shame" will actually mean for local businesses, outside of a scolding delivered by Turner during a press conference on Monday afternoon. Turner did

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Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner Adds Three Bars to City's Coronavirus 'Wall of Shame' - Eater Houston

say that any relevant cases of overcrowding would be referred to the **Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, which has been issuing temporary, 30-day suspensions of liquor licenses for establishments that violate Gov. Greg Abbott's orders to reduce occupancy**. Prospect Park is the latest Houston bar to lose its ability to sell booze for 30 days, joining Handlebar, which earned its suspension last week.

“These are businesses that, quite frankly, are just not serving their patrons well, and not serving their city well. I am hoping more businesses won’t have to be added to the Wall of Shame,” Turner said during the press conference. “This is a healthcare crisis, and the numbers are going in the wrong direction.”

Turner also urged people to stay away from crowded establishments, citing the risk of coronavirus spread in bustling bars and restaurants. “If you go into a place that is crowded and you can’t engage in social distancing, you should turn around and walk out,” Turner said. “This is real. People are dying, people are getting sick, people are in ICU beds. Quite frankly, I have lost my patience with you in that regard.”

During the press conference, Turner also reported a record high two-day count of 1,317 new coronavirus cases, and five new deaths.



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Notorious Houston Hospitality Company Cle Group Will Open Bisou in Dallas - Eater Dallas

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

A Notorious Houston Hospitality Group Has a New Restaurant in the Works for Uptown Dallas

Cle Group made headlines for flouting COVID-19 rules in Houston at the height of the pandemic. Now it's expanding to Dallas.

by [Amy McCarthy](#) | Mar 25, 2021, 10:19am CDT



Bisou in Houston | [Bisou/Facebook](#)

Cle Group, a controversial Houston hospitality group that owns multiple restaurants, will soon debut its first Dallas establishment in Uptown.

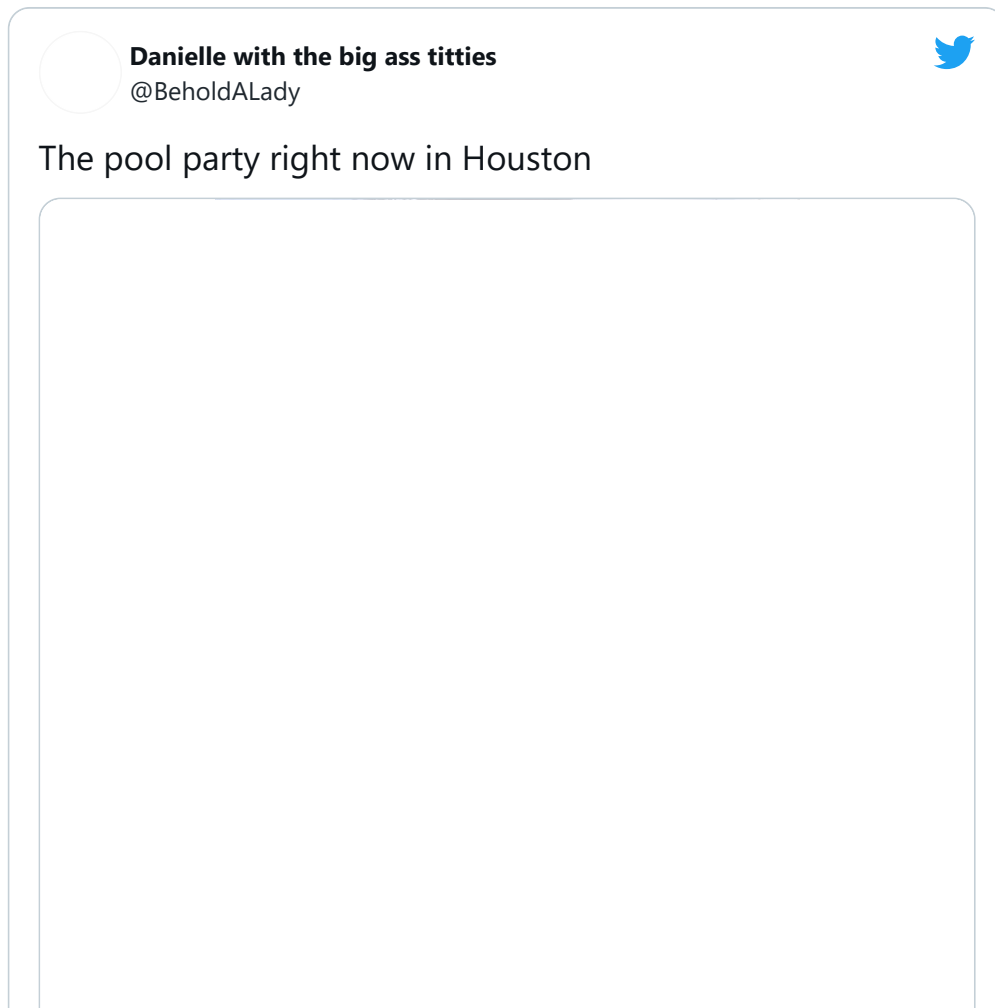
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Notorious Houston Hospitality Company Cle Group Will Open Bisou in Dallas - Eater Dallas

The group is set to take over the ritzy space that was briefly occupied by short-lived New York City export Circo with its upscale lounge-restaurant concept Bisou, according to CultureMap. It's the first Dallas project for the Cle Group, which operates two massive nightclubs — Spire and Cle — in addition to the original location of Bisou in Houston.

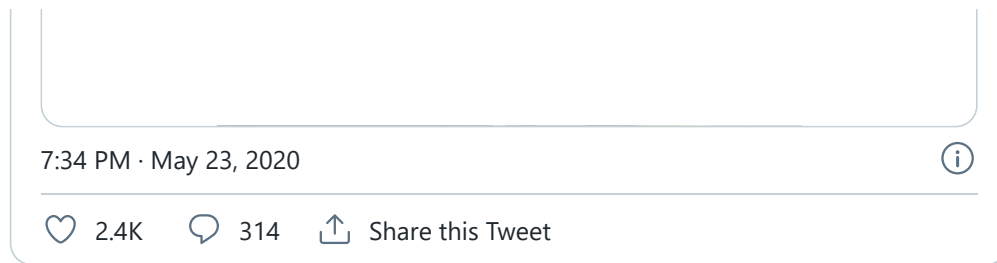
According to Eater Houston, Bisou first opened its doors there in 2018, bringing glam vibes and “continental cuisine” to the tony River Oaks neighborhood. A self-described “social dining hotspot,” Bisou’s menu boasts pricey plates like USDA Prime ribeyes, Texas flounder with spring pea risotto, and veal scallopini.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cle Group made headlines on multiple occasions for allegedly flouting safety guidelines implemented by state officials. On the first weekend that bars in Houston were allowed to reopen in May 2020, a huge pool party packed into the space at Cle, with videos posted to social media showing large crowds of maskless people congregating in the club’s pool, appearing to violate capacity limits that were implemented in an effort to stem the spread of the virus.



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Notorious Houston Hospitality Company Cle Group Will Open Bisou in Dallas - Eater Dallas



When the governor was forced to walk back his plans to reopen bars in Texas at limited capacity in July, Cle Group's club Spire continued to host packed-out parties because its liquor license allowed it to operate as a "reception hall," which meant that it wasn't subject to the same rules that other clubs had to follow. Those parties, which featured rappers like Shad "Bow Wow" Miller, [drew ire from Houston hospitality professionals and elected officials alike](#).

Throughout the past year and into 2021, [Cle Group's clubs had their liquor licenses suspended on multiple occasions](#). In January, the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission announced that Cle would lose its liquor license for 60 days, and Spire wouldn't be able to serve alcohol for 90 days. In fact, Spire just announced plans to reopen following the suspension on March 13.

Bisou is expected to arrive sometime this spring, likely in late April or early May. Stay tuned for an official opening date.

- [Glitzy Houston restaurant-club shimmies into old Circo space in Uptown Dallas](#) [CultureMap Dallas]
- [After Gov. Abbott Ordered Bars to Close, Crowds Still Packed Into Houston Nightclub Spire](#) [EHOU]
- [TABC Slaps Two Houston Nightclubs With Liquor License Suspensions](#) [EHOU]
- [River Oaks' Glamorous New Restaurant Bisou Opens Next Week](#) [EHOU]
- [TABC Suspends Notorious Houston Bar Spire's Liquor License](#) [EHOU]



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Bisou restaurant attracts large crowds with no social distancing

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Bisou restaurant attracts large crowds with no social distancing

By Matthew Seedorff | Published July 16, 2020 | News | FOX 26 Houston

Bisou attracts large crowds with no social distancing

New video posted publicly to Snapchat is gaining national attention. The cellphone video, shared Wednesday night, shows people crowded around a bar inside Bisou, a Houston restaurant.

HOUSTON - New video posted publicly to Snapchat is gaining national attention. The cellphone video, shared Wednesday night, shows people crowded around a bar inside a Houston restaurant.

"We've been out there several times," said Houston Fire Marshal Alfredo Martinez. "The majority of the time, they've been found to be in compliance."

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The videos were taken inside Bisou Restaurant. According to current COVID-19 laws in Texas, restaurants are allowed to be open at half-capacity. However, guests must maintain proper social distancing.

A spokesperson from Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission provided the written statement below regarding concerns sent to FOX 26 regarding Bisou Restaurant.

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Bisou restaurant attracts large crowds with no social distancing

“Under the executive orders, business owners are required to ensure capacity limits and social distancing requirements are observed on their premises,” said TABC spokesperson Chris Porter. “TABC will continue to work with business owners who have questions about the requirements as well as respond to complaints from citizens and local officials about specific locations in their communities. As with other TABC administrative actions, penalties for violations of the executive orders are specific to a location and follow the guidelines put in place by Gov. Abbott. A first offense of the orders will result in a 30-day suspension of a business’ liquor license with stronger penalties – such as a 60-day suspension – for repeat offenses.”

RELATED: Handlebar Houston alcohol permit suspended for violating state reopening orders

According to Martinez, the Houston Fire Marshals have responded to roughly 9,000 social distancing complaints since mid-March. While restaurants can open to 50 percent capacity, business owners are still required to maintain social distancing between groups.

“It’s the owner’s responsibility,” said Martinez. “That’s why we’re out there, educating them and informing them of the governor’s order. You’d be surprised how many just weren’t aware.”

Bisou Restaurant is owned by the Cle Group. This ownership also oversees Club Cle and Spire Nightclub, two other establishments that also received attention for not following social distancing standards.

Social distancing: What to do and what not to do to slow the spread of COVID-19

So far, five businesses in Harris County have received COVID-19 violations from TABC.

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Bisou restaurant attracts large crowds with no social distancing

"We would like them to do the right thing," said Martinez. "We're going to continue to go out and educate them and inform them."

Anyone wishing to report a suspected violation to TABC can do so by calling 1-888-the-tabc, emailing complaints@tabc.texas.gov or using the free tabc:mobile app.

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